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SUBJECT: LABOR LEADER PREDICTS LARGE MARCH 5 ANTI-THAKSIN
TURNOUT

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alex A. Arvizu. Reason: 1.4 (b,
d)

11. (C) Summary: A senior Thai labor leader, who played a key role in organizing labor turnout for the 1992 pro-democracy demonstrations, said there are signs that the coming March 5 anti-Thaksin rally will attract a huge crowd fueled by protesters arriving in Bangkok mid-week. Somsak Kosaisook said he believed only Thaksin's resignation would calm the current political crisis, but that he would not go voluntarily due to fears that his (and his supporters') business interests would suffer. Somsak said he expected protesters and security forces to prepare for the rally peacefully, but that an overflow crowd always had prospect of provoking incidents if the police were ill-prepared. Thailand's weak labor movement remains largely dominated by state-owned enterprise workers, and is throwing its weight behind anti-Thaksin firebrand Sondhi at least in part to promote its anti-privatization stance. End Summary.

12. (C) Thai labor leader Somsak Kosaisook told Laboff in a March 2 meeting that he expected Thailand's labor movement to turn out in force for the planned March 5 anti-Thaksin rally being organized by media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul and other government opponents. Somsak estimated that labor groups would provide about 30,000 members of a rally audience he anticipated would exceed 100,000. He said public transportation lines, particularly train routes from destinations in the South, had become fully booked by mid-week, as friends and relatives of Bangkok-based protesters prepared to attend the Sondhi-led rallies for the first time. Most of these travelers would be staying at residences of acquaintances throughout Bangkok over the next several days, Somsak said, with labor groups having rented a number of rooms at hotels near the rally venue, Sanam Luang, to assist members in showering and obtaining food on the day of the rally.

13. (C) Somsak now heads the informal Thai Labor Campaign network after a long career in senior union positions, including as General Secretary of the Confederation of State Enterprise Labor Unions - Thailand's largest labor confederation. Somsak played a lead role in organizing labor opposition to Thailand's military government in the 1992 uprising, being in charge at that time of mobilizing supporters from Thailand's South to attend pro-democracy rallies. He said the situation today is not comparable to 1992, however, with current political dissent focused on one person, Prime Minister Thaksin, rather than a military regime. "This entire crisis can easily be resolved," he said, "if Thaksin handed power to someone else in his party."

14. (C) Somsak said he was convinced that Thaksin would not leave the Prime Ministership voluntarily, as he and his allies feared that his stepping down would lead Singapore investors to reverse the Temasek-Shincorp telecommunications deal that has helped inflame the current political crisis. Somsak said he believed Thaksin's future actions would be based more on his own business interests than the good of the country, and that labor leaders feared that only military intervention would resolve the current crisis. He also said he had been told by police commanders that they were tasked this week with fielding 5-10 new officers from each province to travel to Bangkok to assist with crowd control efforts.

15. (C) Somsak said he doubted that either side, the security forces or the protesters, would purposely instigate violence on March 5. He worried, however, that a much larger than normal crowd would be difficult to contain if police were ill-prepared, particularly if the public gathering overflowed the Sanam Luang area or began a spontaneous march to another location, as has happened in the past. He said that any violence would be regrettable if it gave the government an opportunity to declare a state of emergency. He said that he and his fellow labor leaders were counseling caution and urging protesters to remain peaceful. Somsak also said that a threat to strike issued by Sirichai Mai-Ngam, who holds Somsak's former position as leader of the state enterprise unions, would likely not come to pass, and would not be part of an effort to pressure Thaksin's resignation. He said it was intended to put the military on notice, however, that unions might try to disrupt water and electricity supplies in

the event of a coup.

16. (C) Somsak dismissed Thaksin's rural base of support as "paper thin," derived only from electoral vote buying that targeted the poor and the uneducated. "We have two countries," Somsak said, "the rural Thailand which elects our government, and the urban Thailand (Bangkok), which expels it." The rural Thais, he said, would not care whether Thaksin was forced out, and many would attend a pro-Thaksin rally on March 3 simply to receive monetary handouts and take advantage of free transportation to Bangkok. "Even the anti-Thaksin crowd filtering into Bangkok early might go to the pro-Thaksin rally just to get the money," Somsak said, adding "I thought of going myself, by I think I'll just send someone."

17. (C) Somsak said that the urban labor movement now sided with the Bangkok middle class, academics and media moguls such as Sondhi due to the overwhelming view that Thaksin had lost his moral legitimacy to lead the country. Somsak said that labor's anti-Thaksin sentiment did not spill over into favoritism towards any political party, such as the Democrats, over Thai Rak Thai (TRT). (Somsak himself is running for the Thai Senate on April 19, with no declared political affiliation.) He said that any number of current TRT leaders (naming Commerce Minister Somkid, Agriculture Minister Sudarat and Industry Minister Suriya as examples) would be acceptable as a replacement for the Prime Minister.

18. (C) Somsak stressed that labor leaders' main economic interest in opposing Thaksin was to derail the proposed privatization of the electrical utility, EGAT, and a number of other state-owned enterprises. Resentment towards privatization dovetailed with public anger at the Temasek-Shincorp deal, he said, due to perceptions that valued national infrastructure assets were being sold off to foreigners, with benefits accruing only to a privileged class of wealthy business leaders allied with Thaksin. Such resentment was further fueled by suspected corruption by government officials in a range of projects, including the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport.

19. (C) Comment: The Thai labor movement, while united in its opposition to Thaksin, remains fractured and disorganized and is considerably weaker than it was in 1992. With less than 300,000 total members out of a workforce of over 30 million, it is following, rather than leading, the current wave of anti-Thaksin sentiment. Somsak is reported to have told colleagues in recent planning meetings that if labor did not take a stand now with Sondhi, nobody would take them seriously in the future. Thaksin himself, along with his Labor Minister, Somsak Thepsutin, has made half-hearted attempts to appeal to labor groups in the last month, most recently offering to raise the minimum wage nationwide to 200 baht per day (USD 5). Minister Somsak, however, announced yesterday that such an increase was not in the cards, due to opposition expressed by the Thai business community.

BOYCE